



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF IRAN'S
TOUR AGENCIES' WEBSITES**

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FBMK 2008 5

**EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF IRAN'S
TOUR AGENCIES' WEBSITES**

By

ALIREZA JAFARI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirement for the Degree of Master of Science**

April 2008



DEDICATION

This thesis is especially dedicated to my wife - Nafise Esmael Motlagh – whose deep and permanent support, patience, love and encouragement made it possible to complete this research. Thank you Nafise!

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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Chairman: Prof. Md. Salleh Hj. Hassan, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This research studies 44 of Iran's tour agencies' websites, using content analysis to identify their quality. The evaluation of the websites was conducted by quantitative content analysis of three main groups of variables known as general information, value-added services and technical quality.

The three groups of variables for measuring the quality of websites in terms of general information, value-added services and technical quality were selected based on UNCTAD's initiative, Lexhagen's (2005) research and Thelwall's (2000) website quality evaluation criteria respectively. In this study, three different tables were devised to evaluate the websites. Each table contained a number of variables and the analysis of them led to answer the questions of this study.

Six websites were examined in pretest in order to improve and refine the codes. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the data.

The results showed that the agencies' websites carried unequal attention to the quality factors studied in this research. While the majority of the websites presented rich technical quality, they did not have a good performance regarding value-added services, meaning that none of the websites could present rich value-added services. Besides, more than half of the websites were categorized as medium, in terms of general information. It was also observed that half of Iran's tour agencies' websites did not meet the characteristics of a high-quality website.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
Sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**PENILAIAN TERHADAP KUALITI LAMAN
SESAWANG AGENSI-AGENCI PERLANCONGAN IRAN**

Oleh

ALIREZA JAFARI

April 2008

Penyelia: Prof. Md. Salleh Hj. Hassan, Dr.

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Penyelidikan ini mengkaji 44 laman sesawang agensi-agensi perlancongan Iran, dengan menggunakan analisis kandungan untuk mengkaji kualiti laman-laman sesawang tersebut. Penilaian ini dikendalikan menggunakan analisis kandungan kuantitatif, dengan tiga jenis pembolehubah yang dikenali sebagai maklumat umum, perkhidmatan nilai tambah dan kualiti laman sesawang. Setiap satunya dipilih berdasarkan inisiatif UNCTAD, kajian Lexhagen (2005) dan kriteria penilaian kualiti laman sesawang Thelwall (2000). Dalam kajian ini, tiga jadual telah digunakan untuk menilai laman-laman sesawang yang terpilih. Setiap jadual mengandungi nombor-nombor pembolehubah dan analisis setiap jadual ini telah membawa kepada jawapan bagi permasalahan kajian ini.

Enam laman sesawang telah dikaji pada peringkat pra-uji dalam usaha untuk memperbaiki dan memurnikan kod-kod yang digunakan. Data-data ini telah dianalisis menggunakan *Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS)*. Selanjutnya frekuensi dan peratusan yang telah diperolehi ini digunakan untuk merumuskan data.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan laman sesawang agensi-agensi yang dikaji tidak mempunyai tumpuan yang seragam kepada faktor kualiti yang dikaji di dalam penyelidikan ini. Walaupun kebanyakan laman-laman sesawang tersebut mempunyai kualiti yang tinggi dari segi, namun prestasi khidmat nilai tambah adalah di bawah kadar memuaskan. Ini bermaksud tiada satu pun daripada laman-laman sesawang tersebut mampu mempersembahkan khidmat nilai tambah yang baik. Tambahan pula, lebih daripada separuh laman-laman sesawang tersebut dikategorikan sebagai sederhana, dari segi maklumat umum. Pemerhatian juga mendapati bahawa separuh daripada laman sesawang agensi-agensi perlancongan Iran tidak memenuhi syarat untuk digelar sebagai laman sesawang yang berkualiti.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 28 April 2008 to conduct the final examination of Alireza Jafari on his Master of Science thesis entitled "Evaluation of the Quality of Iran's Tour Agencies' Websites" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Science.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.



ALIREZA JAFARI

Date: 20 June 2008

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the subject of this study. It provides information on the background of the study, problem statement, research objectives, significance of study, scope and limitations of the study.

Background of the Study

The internet is one of the fastest growing sectors of today's world. The number of Internet users has more than doubled since the year 2000, and in 2006, it was available to over one billion people worldwide and is still growing at a good rate (Paul Budde Communication, 2006). Internet has consolidated itself as a very powerful platform that has changed the way people do business, and the way they communicate. Almost any business can reach the market, directly, fast and economically, regardless of its location. The Internet has made distances shorter and the world smaller. Today it continues to grow rapidly, making McLuhan's Global Village a reality. It has given a globalized dimension to the world, becoming the universal source of information. Internet is actually the most democratic of all the mass media (Internet World Stats, 2007). The development of ICT and particularly the Internet has changed many industries' structures and tourism is not an exception. Table 1 shows the incredibly fast evolution of the Internet from 1995 till October 2006.

Table 1: Growth of Internet users in the world

Date	No. of users (million)	% of world Population
Dec. 1995	16	4
Dec. 2000	451	7.4
Dec. 2003	719	11.1
Dec. 2005	1,018	15.7
Oct. 2006	1,093	16.8

Source: Internet World Statistics, January 2007

Internet has also become the main medium for a company's operation to become advantageous for customers' purchasing. Today, many large businesses in the world are conducted solely online. Amazon.com, for example, attracts the customers from around the world, providing them with easy access to millions of book titles from their desk and the possibility to order books with a click of a button (Zulfikar and Buchanan, 1999).

In the tourism field, popular websites such as Expedia.com and Orbitz.com, and Travelocity.com attract millions of visitors each year who buy their products online. Expedia, individually, provides online travel services for leisure and small business travelers online and offers one-stop travel shopping and reservation services, providing real-time access to schedule, pricing and availability information for 450 airlines, 65,000 lodging properties, and all major car rental companies (Chen, Lee and Barnes, 2004).

The dramatic increase in the use of Internet, which has transformed the world to a global village that can be navigated easily, is a major factor supporting the growth of e-tourism. Besides, the Internet access is becoming available at lower cost through a much wider range of equipment. The ease of access, together with depth of information which characterize the Internet, have developed a new breed of tourism and travel customers who are more independent and prefer to search online, rather than other traditional ways (E-tourism Report, 2004).

The travel and tourism sector is as exposed as any other industry to the forces of change that are being brought about by ongoing developments in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) arena. Travel and tourism has become the single largest category of products and services sold over the Internet and the proportion of business being transacted through this medium is constantly growing (Daniele, 2003). The World Tourism Organization predicts that by 2020 tourist arrivals around the world would increase over 200% compared to 2005. This competitive advantage is not natural, but increasing driven by science, information technology and innovations brought by the ICT (Cardoso, 2005).

ICT can also be an effective tool for developing countries to market their tourism offer and increase their customer base. By encouraging the development of e-business practices in the local economy, ICT makes it easier for countries to organize their tourism industry and stimulate cooperation among stakeholders. Despite the challenges posed in respect of the adoption and usage of ICT in

developing countries, tourism enterprises with well conceived websites are given an opportunity to access international tourism markets on an equal footing with competitors from developed countries. The use of ICT for tourism development can produce economic benefits by generating increased revenue for the local economy and contributing to local development (UNCTAD, 2005).

Developing countries have a necessity to proactively integrate themselves into the ICT society in order to avoid remaining on the periphery of the global economy. ICT is a key driver for them in organizing and marketing their tourism products. Not only has ICT made it easier for developing countries to market and distribute their products and increase their customer base, but they have also made it easier for stakeholders to access market and management data, to share information and build trading partnerships (Ridoutt, 2005).

As part of ICT domain, websites and homepages are far more widespread in the tourism accommodation sector than in any other sector of economy. A whole 82% of enterprises in the tourism sector have a website or homepage (Francois, 2005). Consequently, one of the most crucial necessities for tourism agencies is website. The ease of access and depth of information which characterize the Internet have stimulated the emergence of a new breed of tourism and travel consumers who are more independent and prefer to search for holidays online (E-tourism Report, 2004).

Many travel agencies have developed an Internet presence by posting a website, with detailed travel information. These companies use travel service distribution companies who operate Global Distribution Systems (GDS) to provide up to the minute, detailed data on tens of thousands of flights, hotels, and car rental vacancies. They often allow visitors to sort the travel packages by amenities, price, and or proximity to a city or landmark (Wikipedia, 2006). Tourism companies that sell complex products, such as tours, have noted that visitors often only gather information from a website and then contact to request a brochure or make a reservation, so websites have a powerful role in the purchase decision (Tierney, 2000).

Considering the importance of high-quality websites for tour agencies, this research aims to content analyze Iran's tour agencies' websites in terms of general information, value-added services and technical quality, to measure their quality and probable shortcomings.

Problem Statement

With development of ICT and the Internet, tourism market has become more complex and challenging. Travelers are more sophisticated in their travel choices. Therefore, promoters should create and implement complex strategies to satisfy different travelers with different needs and wants. They need to familiar with all the promoting tools and the relevant recourses. In other words, promoters

should know how to take advantage of different media to promote. how to establish the partnership with other players in the industry, how to use different channels to get the industrial news to get and share the latest knowledge (UNCTAD, 2004).

While tourism has become one of the world's key sources of income, Iran still has a long way to reach its ideal situation. However, the country is determined to improve its situation by implementing different plans (Irpedia, 2005) and one of the important strategies that can be adopted is the appropriate implementation of ICT and particularly websites in tourism field.

As the agencies put increasing resources into their websites, the issue of website quality has assumed a much more prominent role in the tourism industry over the past few years (Stergiou and Airey, 2003). The process of maintaining a high quality website is vital for an agency to strengthen its customer relationships and to excel in business transactions.

However, the growing - but still very limited - published research devoted to the evaluation of these websites suggests the opportunity to conduct more studies about them. Regarding Iran, there is not any prior study or evaluation of tour agencies' websites, so the quality level of these websites is unknown. There is no knowledge on whether the websites provide the audience with necessary general information that should be available in a tourism website or not. It is not

known if Iran's tour agencies websites take advantage of the value-added features, which are vital for a successful promotion of tourism services, and finally, the quality level of these websites, which deals with the technical features that a website should meet, is unknown.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to evaluate the quality of Iran's tour agencies' websites.

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the general information provided by Iranian tour agencies' websites to promote tourism industry.
2. To identify value-added services employed by Iran's tour agencies' websites to promote tourism industry.
3. To determine the level of technical quality in Iran's tour agencies websites.

Significance of the Study

This research is expected to find out the shortcomings in content of Iran's tour agencies' websites. This investigation would be helpful to improve the quality of these websites and would be a guideline for tour operators which are interested in creating or improving their own web page.

This study is also hoped to contribute and strengthen the existing Information Theory. Finally, it is hoped to contribute to the general knowledge in communication technology, particularly in the field of tourism.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research will concentrate on Iran's tour agencies' websites which provide incoming tourists with services and facilities. Other tourism websites of Iran, belonging to the government or other agencies which exclusively handle domestic tourists, will not be focused in this research.

Some researchers observed that the features of the websites they studied had already changed by the time they finished their research (Zulfikar and Buchanan, 1999). Similarly in this study, the content and appearance of some websites changed in stipulated research time and it may continue to change in the future,